Ronald Creagh, an appreciation

Marianne Enckell

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An 'inimitable singularity': this is how Ronald Creagh described the American utopian communities he studied for his doctoral thesis.[1] But Ronald himself was also an inimitable singularity.

A cosmopolitan by family and culture, with British, Italian, Egyptian roots, he had studied in France and written his MA on the free thought periodicals in nineteenth century North America – after having been a priest for many years. He then turned towards the early anarchist movement; this led him to visit the CIRA library (Centre international de recherches sur l'anarchisme) in Lausanne, in the early '70s. My mother, who was in charge at that time, suggested that a familiarity with contemporary anarchists could perhaps help him better understand the history; Ronald reckoned he had not thought about it, but he agreed. He was enthused by his meetings with Paul Avrich and Sam Dolgoff, among many others, and soon became an active exponent and a prolific author of anarchist history, stories and ideas.

His first published book, *Laboratoires de l'utopie* (1983), was an in-depth study of the North American communities' movement. He described his project in an interview in 2016.[2]

Practical utopia is experienced by people who strive to live in the present, without waiting for the revolution with a capital 'R', shaping the world as they would ideally want it. These are the communities I wanted to examine in the American states. Two criticisms have been directed at these communities in an attempt to demolish them. The first is that they have changed nothing in the world. I think that's a criticism that once again falls within our usual productivist mentality, 'it's got to be profitable'. These people aren't profitable, so they're not interesting. Secondly, these communities are often ephemeral. This is actually their quality. Life is ephemeral, and yet we value it. Quality moments may be ephemeral, but they remain essential to our lives. Utopia must remain ephemeral; as soon as it takes root or lasts forever, it turns into a myth and becomes reactionary.

Observing the recent solidarity and anti-globalisation movements, he noted that they 'may be referred to as "accepted anarchism": it is a practice without any formal affiliation to some organized movement or anarchistic ideology [...] the revival of anarchism is also the resurgence of utopia [because] utopia is not simply a landscape of thought, it is embedded in movements'. 3

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[1] John Clark, 'The Modern Social Imaginary', in *Rêves et passions d'un chercheur militant, mélanges offerts à Ronald Creagh,* (Lyon, 2016).

[2] 'Ronald en tête à tête', in *Rêves et passions*, op. cit., my translation.

Is the world wide web a practical utopia? Ronald very soon became fascinated by the possibilities of the internet.

The internet user is a tightrope walker. He travels the Web via hypertext links, suspended bars in nothingness, which he traverses in a series of somersaults. Sometimes a partner catches him upon arrival, sometimes there is no partner. It's not a serene reading, but a circus performance. Sometimes, the cyberworld is inaccessible. The computer refuses, spits out cryptic explanations or stubbornly remains silent. Sometimes you fall into a hole, sometimes you drive along a freeway dotted with flashing advertisements, and an avalanche of information crushes you. Sometimes the screen freezes and the mouse arrow sticks like a flattened fly on a window.[3]

This sounds like a faithful portrait of the incredible website he created, RA Forum, now hosted by CIRA-Marseille.[4] As unpredictable as its author, the website encompasses around 10,000 articles and bibliographical information in eleven languages in its three main sections, Research on anarchism, Elisée Reclus, Dissertations. Try to follow a path, and you'll find yourself in a forest of images, signs, sources, and possibilities, but there is no safe way back. This is the potential of the social imaginary, a concept Ronald Creagh shared with Cornelius Castoriadis.

Ronald Creagh died in Montpellier, September 8th, 2023, at the age of 94. He was emeritus professor at Montpellier University, where he had taught American civilisation for many years and directed several doctoral theses. His main works deal with American history (*Laboratoires de l'utopie*, 1983; enlarged edition, *Utopies américaines*, 2009; *Nos cousins d'Amérique*, 1988; *L'affaire Sacco et Vanzetti*, 2004; *Les États-Unis d'Élisée Reclus*, 2019), with utopias, Reclus, Murray Bookchin, politics and international relations, and various other themes.[5] He wrote scores of articles, both for academic and anarchist journals, gave speeches in various circles, took part in a large number of conferences around the world. Unfortunately, only a few papers by him have been published in English; reviewing his *Utopies américaines* in *Anarchist Studies* 19, 2 (2011), John Clark wrote that it 'certainly needs to be translated into English as soon as possible'. Was it a utopian proposal?

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[3] 'Ma vie dans le cyberspace', *Réfractions*, 10, (2003).

[4] https://archives.cira-marseille.info/raforum/

[5] See for example his collection of essays, *L'imagination dérobée,* (Lyon, 2004): its three parts are titled 'Labyrinths', 'Through the Looking Glass', 'Neo-Landscapes'. The late David Porter judiciously remarked that 'Alternative English translations of dérobée as "stolen", "hidden", or "shielded" resound well with a principal focus of his writing and web support work during the last several decades', in *Rêves et passions*, op. cit.

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